



Partnerships + *Mentorships*

Frédérique Vézina talks to
Kimberly Barber

'The writing is on the wall.' Kimberly Barber's lucid words echo in my mind. For years, there have been rumblings of the need for renewal and reinvention in the world of classical music. After all, opera and art song are seated on historical monuments which were once self-sustaining. Now, the viability of these art forms is constantly threatened both in their economic sustainability and in their relevance to a changing world. Music faculties and conservatories across the country are forced to compete for an ever-shrinking pool of students to fill their classrooms. Similarly, symphonies and opera companies struggle to fill their seats. So where do we go from here?

As Associate Dean, Professor in Voice and Administrative Coordinator in Opera at Wilfrid Laurier

University, Barber has carefully considered the way forward. As she slowly leaves her performing days behind her, Barber increasingly devotes her time to arts advocacy and the development of the next generation of singers, bringing her to question the models in place such as the antiquated master-pupil dynamic which historically prevailed in the music world. The cornerstone of her teaching is inquiry-based and student-centred. She explains that lessons are now peppered with questions like: "How is this new element for you? What is your experience with that? How would you like to proceed? What are you noticing? What would you like to improve here? How can I help?" Barber suggests, as many of the good educators I have had the pleasure of speaking with,

to “talk less, and listen more”, inviting teachers to resist the urge to be so quick to jump in and make all the decisions for students.

In partnership with the Kitchener Waterloo Symphony (KWS) and more recently, Brott Opera, Barber has built a solid bridge between the professional music industry and an educational institution. This marriage of assets could be the answer to some of the strife faced by the performing arts industry and music educational institutions alike. Barber explains that the idea initially came from the KWS around 2016 as a way for them to bring opera back to their programming. An understandable venture given the costly nature of the art form. Financially, the arrangement provides the KWS with a cast of singers at minimal cost, while secondary roles are filled by student soloists, and a full opera chorus—all prepared by the faculty of music. The added bonus is also a booming box office: from a usual average of around 700-800 seats sold per concert (out of 2047), the symphony was able to sell out one of these landmark opera performances. Additionally, they received requests from audience members asking for opera concerts to be part of the yearly programming. This seems like an alluring proposition for any company.

For Laurier University, it was also a slam dunk. Barber relates how valuable the partnership was for the young singers: “Providing students with those real life opportunities is huge. The experience of singing in a big hall with a professional orchestra was priceless. The other really huge piece is to sit in rehearsals and do performances alongside seasoned professional artists. They got to see the level of preparation, how they mark, how they save their voices, how they behave in rehearsals, and how much energy and focus is involved. We saw that we could make a lot more out of this already excellent experience by providing even more mentorship opportunities. So one of the things we did was to bring in the stage director as a clinician for a series of three classes with our students. He offered a class just on presentation skills for our whole voice area, and then he did a class on finding character and artistic self with our opera class.”

Creating these rare intersections between the professional world and the students is truly at the heart of this project. Putting aside all economic

considerations, there are inarguable benefits to exposing young artists to such high performance standards and mentorship opportunities. In my opinion, there is no better way to learn than to be plunged in the core of the action. If we go by the adage of ‘less talking, more listening,’ then students also expand their knowledge by closing their books, and taking in the sights and sounds around them.

Perhaps thinking outside the box could be the key to ensuring prosperity for our arts organizations and music schools. Letting in fresh air and new voices into a world far too dominated by the status quo seems like the road ahead. Music schools have participated in a natural shift in recent years, making representation/diversity in the repertoire that is taught and performed an important foundational pillar.

I do believe that Verdi, Debussy, Mozart and the like will remain brilliant stars in a vast and colourful sky, but there is more. More to say and more to share.

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Artists and audiences alike want to see themselves reflected in art. Our times are shining a light on creators of all types now: women, LGBTQ2S+, people of colour and historically overlooked composers and poets are finally being embraced by an era that is finally rising up to meet them. Young students clamour for repertoire that is alive and inclusive. And so we, educators, companies, and music lovers, must join the new generation on the path they are walking. Only then will we be able to safeguard our equally important classical traditions. **OC**

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